

National Will from a Threat Perspective

E. Margaret Phillips

*Next year we are to bring all the soldiers home
For lack of money, and it is all right.
Places they guarded, or kept orderly,
We want the money for ourselves at home
Instead of working. And this is all right.*

*It's hard to say who wanted it to happen,
But now it's been decided nobody minds.
The places are a long way off, not here,
Which is all right, and from what we hear
The soldiers there only made trouble happen.
Next year we shall be easier in our minds.*

— From "Homage to a Government," Philip Larkin, 1969¹

THE ARMY TRAINING and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) intelligence office's Operational Environment document asserts that U.S. adversaries have identified *national will* as a historically critical vulnerability in U.S. national security posture.² Philip Larkin's poem quoted above speaks to the challenge military operations face when domestic support gives over to fatigue and impatience. Although Larkin wrote in 1969, the sentiments he describes are eternal, and the poem could just as easily be from 2010. National will in the modern age is an even more crucial aspect of military success. As U.S. strategic planners project outward, they must consider just how domestic popular and political support for a conflict (serving here as our definition of the term "national will") will become a target. Commanders in military operations can expect adversaries to consider U.S. troops not only a military target but also a proxy target for national will. Soldiers on the ground in turn must be made to understand how and why they are perceived as symbols, and be given the tools they need to put this knowledge to use in theater.

Although conventional warfare is always a possibility, the primary focus for American interests in the foreseeable future will be irregular warfare. If a decisive victory remains elusive, attrition will prolong the conflict and strain the resources and resolve of the Nation. This dynamic has happened in the past and is occurring again today. Such conditions highlight public approbation as a key element of achieving military aims.

Motivations, tactics, techniques, and procedures involved in future proxy attacks on U.S. national will are important to understand. Three main variables provide a framework for discussing them here: length of operations, the potential for U.S. involvement in ongoing low-intensity conflicts, and ways in which both the United States and its adversaries can target national will.

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Duration of Operation

With the exception of Vietnam, the average length of U.S. engagement in a conflict did not exceed four years—from the American Revolution through the end of the 20th century.³

Among the challenges this history implies for U.S. policymakers is that political objectives can change over time. Such exigencies were certainly the case during World War I, as changing objectives corresponded to escalation of conflict.⁴ A watchful adversary can attempt to synchronize attacks with a change in U.S. objectives, a change in administration, or in response to events on the ground. Adversaries can exploit opportunities to seed and perhaps prompt public doubt. This is especially true when the justification for foreign military involvement is morally questionable to the public. Generating bad news during a time when the conflict's objectives are unclear or in flux is likely to provoke questions about why the United States is expending blood and treasure on a doubtful conflict.

As the United States looks toward a future of continuing irregular warfare on foreign soil, an operation's duration becomes increasingly important. History says that time will be on the side of indigenous adversaries, and traditional notions of decisive victory or defeat become inherently elusive in such

conditions. Recently, retired U.S. Army Lieutenant General David W. Barno stated that the Taliban thinks it is winning the war in Afghanistan; the war is almost over, and they are merely running out the clock.⁵ Taliban members corroborate this belief. "We never worry about time," stated one Taliban fighter. "We will fight until victory, no matter how long it takes. The United States has the weapons, but we are prepared for a long and tireless jihad. We were born here. We will die here. We aren't going anywhere."⁶ Such an attitude reflects the lesson of history and a universal psychological and moral truth: foreign occupying forces can be worn down over time.⁷

Russia's experience in Chechnya is illustrative. In 1818, when the United States was a mere 42 years young, Russia sent the brutal General Aleskei Yermolov to bring the restive Chechen territories under Russian rule.⁸ Yermolov's soldiers committed widespread atrocities, and not surprisingly they were

"We were born here. We will die here. We aren't going anywhere." Taliban insurgent

Mikhail Evstafiev



Chechen fighters surround a Russian helicopter shot down near the Chechen capital of Grozny, December 1994.

unable to subdue the Chechen people.⁹ Ultimately, a young cleric rallied an army of Muslim guerrilla fighters and carried on a rebellion against Imperial Russia for 25 years.¹⁰ Two centuries afterward, relations between Russia and Chechnya remain hostile.

In 1999, then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin once again renewed Russia's conflict in Chechnya—revived under Boris Yeltsin—promising a two-week engagement.¹¹ By 2001, with the Chechen conflict still underway, the Russian public was fatigued.¹² Islamic militants and guerrillas ruled the night by 2002, and Chechen resistance forces coordinated attacks on both Russian troops and high-profile targets within Chechnya.¹³ Militants began suicide bombings and attacks against civilians as well, eventually staging an attack in Moscow itself in 2002.¹⁴

The attack on the Dubrovka Street Theater in Moscow marks a transition for understanding the effects on national will of foreign attacks, as opposed to the impact of domestic attacks. By 2002, Russian citizens were largely ambivalent toward the Chechen conflict.¹⁵ The hostage crisis at the Dubrovka Street Theater in Moscow was staged by Chechen militants to try to coerce the Russian government into withdrawing its troops from Chechnya.¹⁶

A hostage reported a conversation with a militant who explained that because Chechens were unable to do anything to convince the Russian government to withdraw, they were targeting Russian civilians to effect the change they desired. The militant went on to complain that the Russian people were indifferent to the violent situation in Chechnya.¹⁷ The Dubrovka Street Theater was specifically chosen to target Russian national will. It was a symbol of remodeled, post-Soviet Moscow, a capital that thrived while ignoring atrocities carried out in Chechnya by its government.¹⁸ For the next two years, terrorist attacks killed a thousand people in Russia, more than almost any other country in that same period.¹⁹ The attacks prompted harsh responses by the Russian government and military, but initial public fervor eventually waned.²⁰

Contrasting these conditions with those in the United States is revealing. Similar attacks on national will (9/11 for example) have historically rallied Americans, but foreign attacks on American soil are also relatively rare. In the collective con-

science of Russia, Chechnya evokes centuries of conflict, but the United States has had a relatively short historical memory to draw upon. Americans are unused to the historical waxing and waning of nationalistic and ethnic conflicts, unlike Russia. (Because one could argue that Native Americans and African-Americans have had to cope with white European colonialism and imperialism for 500 years, this point must be understood with that background in mind.)

In the Irish rebel song, “Go On Home British Soldiers,” the lyrics proclaim: “For eight hundred years we’ve fought you without fear / And we will fight you for eight hundred more.”²¹ The sentiments in this song reflect generations of conflict, which flared up again in 2009 with the killing of two British soldiers and the discovery of fertilizer bombs throughout Northern Ireland.²² Moreover, these sentiments reflect the same strategy articulated by the Taliban fighter: there is plenty of time, we live here, and all we have to do is get you to



U.S. Navy PO2 Jim Watson

A New York City fire fighter looks up at what remains of the World Trade Center after its collapse during the 9/11 terrorist attack.

leave. Countries with long historical memories are perhaps more willing to accept and even learn to ignore continued struggle (as the Russians seem to have done with Chechnya), especially when issues of nationalism or ideology are involved. Although the United States has had no experience with long-term conflict, it should recognize the potential for prolonged struggle where long-term peaceful outcomes remain elusive.

Influencing National Will

Lengthened conflicts and changing objectives lead to a question frequently raised about Iraq and Afghanistan. What will “victory” look like? In his article “Theory of Victory,” J. Boone Bartholomees supports the Clausewitzian notion that “victory” is achieved through breaking “will” when means of resistance are virtually impossible to eliminate—especially in places where easily purchased and constructed improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are the primary “weapon of strategic influence” (a concept to be explored later).²³ But what does “victory” mean in the context of U.S. national will? I accept Bartholomees’ assertion that notions of victory are ultimately an assessment. Objective facts are important, but perception is what allows a side to claim ultimate success.²⁴ In America, Bartholomees suggests, the group that first declares a U.S. win or defeat is the American population. In his rubric, first and foremost, the American people themselves determine victory, which causes the American political and military elites to declare victory, followed by an acknowledgement of a win by U.S. allies, and finally, the acceptance of a U.S. victory by the international community.²⁵

In an irregular conflict, the unlikelihood of a symbolic act of surrender or *détente*, which denies the American public its neat, historical idea of a clear win or loss, complicates this definition of success.²⁶ Victory can sometimes mean only successful reinstatement of stability. There is no treaty signed, no sword surrendered, and the objectives of the conflict were esoteric to begin with. If the reasons for and means of executing the conflict are not clear, defensible, and justifiable, then there may be no way to obtain anything that looks like traditional victory.

As the population waits on the home front, the problem that perception-as-victory creates for U.S.

commanders is the likelihood that present and future adversaries will “attack U.S. national and political will with very sophisticated information campaigns as well as seek to conduct physical attacks on the U.S. homeland. Military operations will result in operations demanding long-term commitments at extended distances and requiring a wide range of interagency and nonmilitary tools to resolve. All of which will be carried out under the unblinking eye of an omnipresent formal and informal media potentially giving local events global significance.”²⁷

The concept known as “the battle of the narratives” has gained traction in certain defense circles, and is described in Joint Forces’ Command’s 2008 Joint Operational Environment as “sophisticated perception management,” in which adversaries incorporate individual attacks and events into a “coherent strategic communications program.”²⁸ As Kenneth Payne’s “Waging Communication War” articulates, the problem with this viewpoint is that an insurgent does not have to convert every member of a society or population in order to achieve his objectives.²⁹ Depending on his political objective, the insurgent could accurately say he has won in the event of a U.S. withdrawal.³⁰ Therefore, adversary messages are unlikely to take the form of a compelling narrative designed to enthrall and seduce an audience. Like the Chechen radicals at the Dubrovka Street Theater, future U.S. adversaries will simply seek to engage in a battle of wills, not narratives, and they will fight that battle with actions and messages intended to weaken U.S. national will.

Attacks against U.S. forces in theater designed to target national will can be particularly effective: state-on-state conflicts are likely to decline as non-state actors increase and strengthen.³¹ Irregular adversaries will continue to mobilize their strengths against our weaknesses. As our experience in Iraq demonstrates, dramatic attacks on U.S. forces are a cost effective force multiplier. For the price of a cell phone camera, adversaries can send a powerful message to U.S. policymakers and voters. A rise in online activity, including news consumption, assures a built-in audience for such spectacles.³² According to Payne, “insurgents in Iraq, particularly, al-Qaida, regularly deployed with combat camera teams and distributed professionally edited short films that intercut ideology and violence.”³³

Policymakers... are the deciders of whether a war can accrue public moral support (psychologically and ethically).

The U.S. military is not responsible for cultivating the national will required for this kind of conflict (though they are partially responsible for maintaining it). Policymakers and shapers have that responsibility because they are the deciders of whether a war can accrue public moral support (psychologically and ethically). Military planners can only assume from America's historically limited patience for prolonged military engagement that *national will* remains an adversary target and act accordingly. As mentioned earlier, U.S. military forces can expect continued attacks from weapons of strategic influence, of which today's IED is a primary example, since its "immediate and cumulative effect [is to] achieve strategic goals politically, economically, socially, and militarily."³⁴ The Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization predicts that continued, improved, and expanded use of IEDs will spread globally for the very reason that "no other widely available terror weapon has more potential for mass media attention and strategic influence as does the IED."³⁵ Regardless of the future of IEDs themselves, the cumulative impact of IED attacks on U.S. national will can affect and perhaps motivate future adversarial attacks on U.S. forces. The form that weapons of strategic influence take in the future does not matter as much as the characteristics and goals behind them: simplicity, adaptability, visibility, lethality, and exploitability.

Adversaries are always on the lookout for information opportunities to exploit—by not only publicizing their own actions, but also highlighting mistakes by U.S. military members. The ironic predicament of terror tactics is that only an occupying force begins with a moral deficit, and the onus is on that occupier to maintain national will. As aforementioned, information and its value cannot be divorced from a discussion of national will. When photographs or reports documenting

irresponsible behavior by U.S. forces find their way into the public sphere, our adversaries have an information opportunity because they have a moral wedge. We must plan future missions under the assumption that someone is watching and broadcasting, often with the intent to influence U.S. national will. That means we have to be consistently better, morally speaking, than the indigenous enemy who begins with a moral advantage.

U.S. operations must therefore incorporate the understanding that conflicts will be long, irregular, and broadcast worldwide. To sustain their morale and resolve, U.S. forces must understand that, while the domestic population is coping with historical, conventional notions of "victory," they have to accept that irregular conflicts end with unforeseen compromises. The problem of national will persists as long as the public misunderstands the war or if they perceive duplicity in its escalation and execution.

Our adversaries' main objective then is not merely to win converts, but to weaken U.S. will to the breaking point. In support of that objective, adversaries will likely have studied past U.S. engagements to realize public support wanes the longer a conflict goes on. Furthermore, the rapid spread of information worldwide compresses reaction time and can hasten outcomes. Therefore, attacks against U.S. troops will focus on lethality and effectiveness, on brutality and newsworthiness. An IED attack against a U.S. platoon is ultimately strategic, not tactical.³⁶

Ramifications

The relevance for training and leader development is that today, most communications take place at the tactical level between officers and Soldiers without strategic-level concepts.³⁷ Leaders down to the tactical level must have a comprehensive and evolving understanding of the strategic setting. They have to have the ability to effectively communicate to Soldiers that what they do and how they are perceived has far-reaching and long-lasting ramifications. If tactical units are the targets of weapons of an adversary attempting to send a strategic message to a domestic U.S. audience, they must understand the conflict and operational environment to effectively combat that opponent.



U.S. and Iraqi military media document Patrol Base Doria's transfer of authority ceremony near Kirkuk, Iraq, 4 June 2010. U.S. Soldiers from the 6th Squadron, 1st Armored Cavalry Regiment, 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division, turned over control of the base to Iraqi Security Forces as part of a phased withdrawal from the region.

The adversary thinks globally and acts locally. Improved strategic understanding will have successfully permeated U.S. forces when consideration of long-term, global impact informs everything from security, to patrolling, to internal and external communications, and to interactions with locals.

Military leaders will also need to identify information opportunities of their own. Their adversaries are also being watched and broadcast, and their mistakes can turn opinion against them at home and abroad. For example, cell phone images of Guinean soldiers committing crimes served to strengthen opposition resolve to oust the leader of the country's military junta.³⁸ In such instances of information opportunity, knowing when to insert a troop presence, as opposed to letting a country's citizens resolve a situation themselves, is a critical instinct U.S. military leaders need to develop. A thorough understanding of the operational environment will help leaders properly identify information opportunities and appropriate courses of action.

Al-Qaeda's Abu Musab al-Zawahiri said in July 2005, "More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media . . . We are in a media battle, in a race for the hearts and minds of our umma (people)."³⁹ Our adversaries have said it themselves—they are not interested in a battle of the narratives. Narratives are a means to an end: information intended to diminish U.S. political and popular support for conflict. The term "battle of the narratives" seems to imply that the communication of a compelling narrative is an end in itself. Zawahiri is correct that the battlefield is the media—indeed, the battlefields chosen by Al-Qaeda and organizations like it are those they know present challenges for U.S. forces and opportunities for irregular forces. Their strategic acumen creates a paradox for the United States—while the tactical becomes the strategic, tactical victories do not always equal strategic successes. U.S. forces may win a tactical battle, but they still appear vulnerable when homemade explosives penetrate expensive armor. Battles that would be victories in

a tactical military sense become strategic losses when the public image of that battle is one of failure, moral or operational.

In a battle of wills, as opposed to a battle of narratives, what ultimately matters is not so much symbols or words but deeds consistent with those words. Looking into a future of continued irregular warfare, U.S. forces will never be able to achieve

objectives solely by appealing to the public's faith in U.S. values. Adversaries will continue to try to weaken the will of the United States and its allies by harming and undermining U.S. forces, and planners at all levels have to limit the adversary's information opportunities. Soldiers and leaders must be equipped with the tools to act as often as possible in a way that is clear, defensible, and justifiable. **MR**

NOTES

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